

# Labour Heritage

## LABOUR HERITAGE BULLETIN

SUMMER 2003

### BATTERSEA SOCIALIST WOMEN'S CIRCLE 1908-1910

#### Introduction

A few months ago a friend of Stan Newens came across the minute book of the Battersea Women's Socialist Circle. He passed it to Stan who passed it to me because of my active involvement in studying Battersea's labour movement history. The minute book covers the period from the Circle's formation in May 1908 to early February 1910. How long the Circle continued to be active after that date is not yet known. What the minute book does is to throw light on the activities of a group of socialist working and middle class women, what they regarded as issues appropriate for socialist women to concentrate on. Its members were a mix of people with many years of experience, and what would appear to be newer entrants into the movement. The way the Circle operated means the members were engaged in a collective learning and personal development process. The Circle was a training ground, honing members' knowledge, their skills as political organisers, speakers and debaters, and their administrative and organisational capabilities.

#### Background

The local background is important. The Battersea Social Democratic Federation branch had existed since early 1885, and supported John Burns being elected as London County Councillor at the end of 1889. It had helped to form the Progressive Alliance which got Burns elected to Parliament in 1892 and which took control of Battersea Vestry in 1894. Within 18 months it had fallen out with the Alliance. Co-operation took place with the main organisations in the Alliance through the Stop the War Committee opposing the Boer War from 1899-1902. One of the streets on the Latchmere (Burns) Estate is named after the Boer General Joubert. The SDF and then Social Democratic Party became bitter enemies of John Burns. They regarded him as a traitor when he accepted membership of the Liberal Cabinet in late 1905. The Alliance went through a difficult phase up to 1906, when a socialist slate was put up against its candidates. The SDF and the local Independent Labour Party went into alliance forming the Battersea Socialist Council. This issued its own newspaper *Battersea Vanguard* from July 1907. Surviving copies go up to July 1908. Towards the end of that period the ILP split off from the Council. 1908 also saw the formation of Battersea Labour Party. A combined socialist list stood against the Progressives in 1909, and helped to



lead to the Alliance's complete rout and the taking of control of the Council by the Municipal Reformers, who were London's Conservatives. The Alliance pulled itself back sufficiently enough in 1912 to regain control with a narrow majority. One of the complicating factors in Battersea politics from 1906 was the issue of votes for women. The Women's Political & Social Union targeted Burns in Battersea because he was a member of the Cabinet. He deeply resented this, and it did add to the local political tensions. The increasingly militant tactics of the WPSU led to the breakaway under Charlotte Despard, who lived in Battersea's Nine Elms district, and others to form the Women's Freedom League. This then was the complexity of local politics in the period covered by the Circle's Minute book.

The other aspect of the background that needs to be taken into account is that many women had played prominent roles in local socialist and co-operative organisations. These included:

- Edith LANCHESTER was a close friend of Mary Gary helping her run the Battersea Socialist Sunday School in the 1890s. Her family had her committed to an asylum because she lived with her partner without getting married. There was a national campaign to support her and Burns intervened as MP to get her released. She remained an active socialist through the Edwardian period. Her daughter Elsa became a leading film actress who married Charles Laughton.

- Catherine WEBB, who grew up in a staunchly active co-operative family, became President of Battersea Co-operative Women's Guild in 1888 and 1889, edited the Woman's Corner pages of the Co-operative News in 1903 and 1904. In July 1903 she was elected to the Council of the Southern Education Association of the co-operative movement at its 4th Annual Meeting and Conference, the first year Guild branches were admitted to membership. She became prominent in national women's organisations.
- Mrs FEARN was a member of Battersea and Wandsworth Co-operative Society's Education Committee in 1895.
- Mrs Catherine NORRIS was a member of the SDF taking part in its deputation to the Battersea Vestry in October 1892.
- Mrs SATCHELL was a member of Battersea and Wandsworth Co-operative Society Committee of Management in 1895, the only woman member of the Committee between 1894 and 1904.
- Mrs LARLEY donated 3 shillings to the Battersea Socialist Sunday School in 1894.
- Francis MANDSBRIDGE, the mother of Albert Mandsbridge the founder of the Workers Education Association in 1903 in

Battersea, had been active in the Co-operative Women's Guild.

- Mrs STEELE was Secretary of the Battersea Co-operative Women's Guild in 1889.

### Formation of Circle

There were 5 women at the formation meeting of the Circle: Mrs Singleton, Mrs Dark, Mrs Saunderson, Miss Underwood and Mrs Mahaney. Their purpose was to form a women's organisation affiliated to the Battersea Socialist Council, with the objects of educating women in the principles of socialism, co-operating actively in propaganda and political activity with existing branches of the British Socialist Party in the furtherance of the cause of socialism. There would be a minimum subscription of one penny per week. It was decided 'That the question of union with any other Women's Socialist Organisation should be discussed at a future date, as it was felt that, being voteless, questions of policy did not so much concern women as did the broad principles of socialism on which all could unite.' They hoped 'that women of all shades of socialistic opinion will thus be able to join this organisation.'

A list of members in pencil at the back of the minute book shows 18 members. But it is clear from the minutes themselves that there were additional members.

From other sources we know something about some members, often through their husbands.

- Caroline Selina Ganley (nee Blumfield) (16.9.1879-1966). She had joined the Social

Democratic Party (formerly SDF) in 1906. She became one of the first supporters of the Women's Socialist League (later Women's Labour League) and WSL Secretary 1907/8. She stood for the Council in 1909

- Mary Gray. She had been a member of the Battersea SDF/P for many years. She started the first Socialist Sunday School in Britain in Battersea in 1892, and was its Secretary in 1898 and 1900. She was a member of Wandsworth Board of Guardians from 1898.
- Mrs Ellen Humphreys. She stood for the SDP in the Council elections in 1909. She was married to William Henry Humphreys, a clerk. He was a SDF/P activist, but also a member of the ILP in 1907. She stood for the Council in 1906, and for the London County Council in 1908. A former soldier in November 1908 he lectured on 'Socialism, Patriotism and Militarism' at the SDP's central London hall, wrote an article for the SDP's newspaper Justice in January on 'Class Rule in the Services'. He chaired the SDP Demonstration on 20 January at Trafalgar Square organised to demand the release of some soldiers and the abolition of the court martials in peacetime. He was Chairman of an Anti-



Conscription Rally. He was an SDP candidate for the Council in 1909 and 1912.

- Mrs Field. She is probably the wife of Arthur Field, a member of the first executive committee of the ILP and active socialist and co-operator in Maidstone before moving to London in 1904. He went on with Saklatvala to set up the Workers' League for India, and helped pave the way for Saklatvala's adoption by Battersea Labour Party as its Parliamentary candidate in the 1920s.

- Mrs Garnsey was married to William Garnsey, a bricklayer who represented his Union on the Battersea Trades & Labour Council. A member of the SDP he stood for the Council in 1909 and 1912, and became a Labour Councillor from 1919-25.

- Miss Lavender. She was possibly the daughter or sister of H Lavender the Secretary of Battersea Independent Labour Party up to January 1907.

- Mrs Tomalin was probably the wife of Ernest who stood for the Council in 1912, and was a Councillor from 1919-22.

- Mrs Mahany may have been the wife of the Secretary of 'Battersea Vanguard', the

newspaper of the Battersea Socialist Council.

What is interesting to note is that three of these women lived on the Latchmere (Burns) Estate, which celebrates its 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary this year as the first of the Battersea municipal housing schemes. They are Mrs Humphreys, Mrs Garnsey and Mrs Tomalin. It is not clear whether another resident of the estate Mrs Jane Agnes Worthy was a member, although the Circle certainly sought her advice. She was on the Board of Guardians in 1907 and again from 1919-22. Her husband, a printer, Frederick William was a Progressive Alderman from 1903-9 and Mayor 1907-9. He was a Councillor from 1917-19 and Mayor again for that period.

The Circle was also closely linked to Charlotte Despard, the leader of the Women's Freedom League and socialist living in Battersea's Nine Elms district and she agreed to help with their open air meetings. Women's politics were complicated because there were active branches of both the League and the WPSU.

The Circle undertook a range of activities including political education, public meetings, support to the local Socialist Sunday School, welfare and political work with the unemployed, as well as supporting wider activities of the local socialist movement.

What is interesting to note is that *Battersea Vanguard* carried an article for women from its first issue, and clearly is part of the dynamic that led to the formation of the Circle.

### Political Education

An important part of the Circle's meetings was devoted to political

education and discussion. Subjects in 1908 covered Women under Socialism, Feeding the Children, Votes for Women, Women in Local Government, State Maintenance and the development of the SDP and the Socialist Party of Great Britain. These debates were started by a talk by a member.

For several meetings they studied Morrison Davidson's book 'The Old Order and the New', reading a chapter collectively or having a resume of a presentation by a member.

Because of the amount of activity during the winter of 1908 and 1909 political education discussion ground to a halt. The Circle was keen to restart and decided that at each meeting from towards the end of February 1909 they should have a section of meetings devoted to discussion to give members 'further knowledge on Socialist subjects', and 'to afford them practice in speaking, answering questions and chairmanship.'

Subjects in 1909 included: women under socialism, education, state maintenance for children, officialdom under socialism, adult suffrage v. limited Bill, socialist propaganda and how to reach women.

Mrs Ganley's talk on socialism in the home promoted discussion on the freedom of the individual under socialism, and 'how it is hoped that the "work" problem of the existing home would be solved.'

### **Socialist Sunday School**

Although the Battersea SDF had set up the first Socialist Sunday School, it had not survived. When Alex Gossip launched the Socialist Sunday Schools in Glasgow Battersea took up the idea, and formed a Committee, on which as

representatives of the Circle were Mrs Ganley, Mrs Humphreys and Mrs Mahanoy. In October 1908 Gossip came to speak to the Committee about his method of running a School. The school took in its first 18 children in November. By the end of August 1909 the Sunday School was in danger of collapsing because there were not enough adults to attend to the children. William Garnsey came to the Circle to ask for help. The Circle proposed that the School Committee prepare a plan of management, and that the Circle would appoint members to take part in the School. Then Mrs Humphreys and Mrs Richards agreed to join the Committee, and Mrs Ganley agreed to talk to the children. A report back on the School by Mrs Richards convinced all the members present that it was absolutely necessary some women should be working in the School. Mrs Pottbury agreed to go on the Committee.

In January 1910 the children put on an entertainment. By this stage over 40 children were involved.

### **Women's Meetings**

For several weeks the Circle organised a Women's Meeting for 31 January 1909. The hall cost £1 to hire. 100 posters and 2,000 handbills were printed, and a piano was hired. Because they could not hire a professional singer, several members agreed to learn socialist songs, and 300 hymn sheets were prepared. The minutes record no detail about what happened at the meeting, other than it made a profit.

The Circle also supported the Women's Labour Day event at Earls Court in 1909.



## Women in Public Office

Mrs Singleton's talk in July 1908 on 'Women in Local Government' promoted Mrs Gray to give some personal experiences in the work of a Poor Law Guardian, which provided that a woman's watchful eye and practical common sense is of enormous value in such work. The general conclusion was that it was not only advisable but necessary that women should take an active part in all that affects the corporate life of the people.

When a branch of the Women's Local Government Society was formed, the general opinion was that political action on non-party lines was impossible. This did not stop several Circle members joining and others being keen to go to a meeting called by it in June 1909 to hear a lecture on Borough Council work.

In July 1908 the Circle discussed the report of the Care Committees of the LCC on the subject of feeding children. By October 1909 Mrs Evans had been appointed to one of the Committees and reported on its work to the Circle.

The Circle wrote to the Chairman of the LCC in September asking that women be made members of the Old Age Pension Committees.

In December the SDP invited the Circle to take part in a Conference to decide what action, if any, should be taken for the 1909 Borough elections. Their business prevented them having time to discuss the resolution coming out of the Conference, by which time the ILP branch had left the Battersea Socialist Council. The Circle wanted to know which organisations remained in the Council. Finally in June 1909 the Circle agreed to support 'only avowed Socialists', The ILP/SDP split affected the election, unable to reach a joint

approach because they could not agree the same conditions for a joint campaign. The SDP 'being avowed socialists, and the I.L.P. being under the ruling of the Labour Party.' In the week leading up to the election campaign the Circle agreed to address election literature and to canvass women electors. By now both Mrs Ganley and Mrs Humphreys had agreed to stand as candidates. The total socialist vote was 1,409.

In January 1910 the SDP asked the Circle whether any of its members would be prepared to stand for the Board of Guardians elections.

## Public Meetings

The Circle held a series of public open air meetings in Battersea Park on Sunday evenings at 6.30pm during the summer of 1908 from the end of July through to mid September. For 1909 they planned them for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of the month starting in May. Charlotte Despard spoke at the first two, and the Circle was able to hire the Women's Freedom Van to support their meetings. As well as local Freedom League supporters there was also a WPSU branch, the contact for which was Miss Fitz-Herbert, living in Cambridge Mansions. At these open air meetings the Circle sold socialist newspapers and pamphlets and books by Robert Blatchford, the editor of the Clarion newspaper. When the Clarion Van came to Battersea Park in September the Circle was invited to provide members to chair two of the meetings. Mrs Singleton and Mrs Garnsey agreed to do so. Advertising was done by either handbills or chalking the pavement.

## Unemployment

A major issue of concern to the Circle was the impact on families experiencing unemployment. They discussed Robert Blatchford's scheme for helping the unemployed by distributing bread, for which purpose a Central Committee was formed. The Circle approached the Battersea Clarion Cinderella Club to take on the work, but it had already agreed its plan of activities for the winter of 1908. Blatchford wrote to the Circle to ask it to take on the task. The Circle was also represented on the local Right To Work Committee. The Committee managed to get a Town's Meeting, a public meeting chaired by the Mayor, on unemployment. Circle members proposed the main resolution stating that socialism was the only solution for unemployed problem, which was unanimously passed.

The Circle visited a number of families to decide which ones to support. It also recommended that the husband of one destitute family be given work by the local council. It tried to organise street collections on Christmas Day outside churches by unemployed men. They were unable to raise much money that way.

The Circle hoped that the Guardians had the power to give out door relief, but it turned out that they did not.

## Aftermath

In February the Circle's active members had dropped and meetings were becoming very poorly attended. It was thought best to close the Circle, for members to join the SDP and the funds be transferred to the SDP for the benefit of any members who were unemployed. Yet week later a further meeting was

held, so whether it continued for longer is not clear.

This is very much a preliminary assessment of the Circle. There is a considerable amount of research to be done into local and socialist papers, and more biographical work on the women. Although it may have been short lived, I think the Circle had a lasting legacy. Women became increasingly active and the change in the situation from 1918 is marked. I am not convinced that this was simply because of the extension of the vote to women.

The Labour Party, which emerged to replace the Progressive Alliance, which the Liberals had left during the War, had the local socialist organisations within it, as well as the trade unions and other labour movement organisations. The Battersea Party started the post War period by fielding a woman as its Parliamentary candidate for North seat: Charlotte Despard. With the help of finance from Charlotte Despard Caroline Ganley was organising the Party machine. In the election campaign for the Council in 1919 a number of women stood, including Ganley herself. Marion Winton Evans, a Circle member, was appointed a Labour Alderman from September 1921 - November 1922. Among the other women were:

- Mrs Emily Hayes Diedericks DUVAL who was elected and remained a Councillor until her death in 1924.
- Mrs Jessie HOCKLEY, the Secretary of the Battersea Branch Railway Women's League was elected from 1919-22, and stood unsuccessfully in the elections of 1922, 1925 and 1928. Harry Wicks, one of



the founders of the Balham Group remembered her as being part of the backbone of the Nine Elms Ward of the Labour Party in early 1920s.

- Mrs Edith Monica RAYNOR, whose husband was prominent in Labour politics, stood for the Council in 1922 and the Board of Guardians in 1925 and 1928.
- Mrs Laura WINFIELD stood for Labour in 1922 and 1925.
- Mrs DURSTON represented Battersea Herald League at Communist Unity Convention.
- Josephine RINTOUL was a candidate in the Guardians election in 1919.
- Mrs Matilda Jane ROBINSON, a tailoress, who was an Alderman 1922-8; and Councillor 1928-45, and Guardian 1920-1930.
- Mrs Mary Hannah ROSE was Secretary of the Women's Co-operative Guild in 1919, and a Councillor 1922-1930.

As for Caroline Ganley she became an increasingly important figure in the London movement. From 1912 when she became a member of a School Care Committee, she was active on issues of the welfare of mothers and their children. When she became a member of the Battersea Borough Council in November 1919, she was an obvious choice for the Chairmanship of the Health and Maternity Committees. Under her guidance the Council greatly expanded welfare services. Her first spell of membership of the Council ended in 1925. (She seems to have briefly been a member of the Communist

Party). She was active in the consumer co-operative movement. She served on the Board of the West London Co-operative Society, and on the London Co-operative Society Board from 1921 when the WLCS merged with the LCS. She remained on the Board until 1946, and was its first woman president in 1942. She was also a member of the Women's Co-operative Guild, a member of the Lavender Hill branch, Labour candidate for Paddington North 1935, LCC candidate for South Battersea in 1919 and 1922, and in the 1922 by-election and a member of the LCC 1925-28, 1934-7, London Co-operative Society Board Member 1921-46 and its President 1942-46, Labour MP Battersea South, July 1945 to 1951 and a member of Battersea Borough Council 1953-65. Her husband James was a cutter at the Royal Army Clothing Factory in Westminster. They married in 1901. He was also politically active, for example standing for the Council in 1909 and 1912, 1919 and 1924, and being Chair of the Battersea Herald League in 1920, which merged into the newly formed Communist Party.

Sean Creighton

## WOMEN AND LABOUR

The theme of the Labour Heritage AGM this year was the history of women and the labour movement. It was held in the Women's Library, now located in a former wash-house in the East End of London.

The first speaker was **Mary Davis**, Professor of Labour History at the Centre for Trade Union Studies, London Metropolitan University. She attempted to give an overview of women and the



labour movement from 1789-1951. Women had been in the labour movement right from the beginning, as cotton spinners they were amongst the first trades unionists in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But many labour histories did not account for this and assumed that the movement had a male identity. Women's work was often hidden from history, they worked from home and their domestic tasks had been essential to sustaining a male workforce in heavy industry. Women were involved in the Chartist movement and the general unions of the 1840s. The New Model Unions, which became the trend from the 1850s tended to exclude women from membership and they required long apprenticeships to be admitted to the trade. This affected trades such as bookbinding and engineering. Male trades unionists tended to campaign for a 'family wage' so that women did not have to work. In the 1880s when trades unionism started to grow amongst unskilled workers, women joined – this movement received an impetus from the Bryant and May match girls strike, possibly as important as the dockers' strike of 1889. During World War 1 nurseries were opened so that women could work to replace the men who were in the army, but these were closed at the end of the war. However the growth of new electrical engineering factories in the 1920s and 1930s saw opportunities for work for women as employers favoured workers with 'nimble fingers' who were good at 'multi-skilling'. Organisations such as the National Federation of Women Workers were involved in the recruitment of women into the trades union movement. Often male trades union officials were patronizing in their attempts to recruit women. One advert stressed that women

would have more money to 'spend on their health and beauty' if they joined the union and earned more money as a result!

### **Labour and the Standing Joint Committee**

The second speaker was **Christine Collette**, a freelance historian who spoke on the Labour Party and the Standing Joint Committee. This was not a body that many had heard of – it had lasted from 1918 to 1951 and had a lot of influence. It represented women in industrial organizations with over 1,000 members, women in the Labour Party and the Co-operative Movement. It affiliated directly to the Socialist International, not to the Labour Party. By 1939 there were over 300,000 women members in the Labour Party, half of its membership. At its peak the SJC represented over a million women in the labour movement. It campaigned for more representation of women within the labour leadership, took up enthusiastically women's issues such as suffrage, birth control, protective legislation for domestic workers and championed the cause of single women, who were often vilified by society at the time. Single women had different housing needs to those of families. These were issues which the Labour Party itself was often slow to embrace. Nevertheless the SJC came into conflict with feminist organizations at the time on the issue of protective legislation for women workers. These organizations wanted equal rights as citizens with men, not special protection.



influenced government policy on women's issues.

### Co-operative Women's Guild

The third speaker was **Jane Grant** who has completed a doctorate on the history of women's organizations. She spoke on the Co-operative Women's Guild. This was founded in 1883 and involved thousands of working class women. As well as women's issues it campaigned consistently for peace, and was very involved in the 'white poppy movement'. This became strained in the 1930s when pacifism seemed to conflict with anti-fascism. The Guild trained generations of women in public speaking so that they had the confidence to participate in all aspects of public life. Women have spoken with pride and delight in their life as a 'guildswoman', even if their involvement led to frequent rows with their husbands. The image of the guild was one of the bread and flowers, this was seen in some of their beautiful posters and banners. We were able to enjoy slides of some of these banners with slogans such as 'Peace, prosperity and progress' and 'No to militarism in schools'. At Guild pageants women dressed up and brought baskets of flowers from all over the country. At the peak of its membership the guild had 87,000 members, but since the 1940s it has been in steady decline – reporting only 2,247 in 2002. Little has been done to arrest this decline- branches fall into inactivity, leaders argue amongst themselves, and younger women no longer get the support and training from their elders. Nevertheless the influence of the Guild on life for women has been considerable – over ten books have been written about the movement, and continue to be written and it has itself published 322 pamphlets. It has



CARD OF MEMBERSHIP.

### Leah Manning

In the afternoon **Stan Newens**, Chair of Labour Heritage, gave a talk on Leah Manning. He has co-authored a book on this teacher and activist entitled '*A life for education*'. Leah Manning was a Christian Socialist who was to become the first woman president of the National Union of Teachers in 1930. Her career as a teacher began in Cambridge where she stayed after graduating at the university. She taught at a ragged school for poor



children on the outskirts of the city, 70-80 children in a class. Seeing their plight she campaigned for free school meals, milk and after school playgroups. She continued teaching after her marriage, defying the ban on the employment of married women. She also became involved in trades union activities, and in 1924 went on to the National Executive of the NUT. She was a JP and was involved in the production of a teachers' magazine – the '*School Mistress*'. In 1931 she was for a short while on the Labour Party National Executive Committee, but she failed to be selected to be a parliamentary candidate at that time. She became Assistant Education Officer for the NUT. In 1937, during the Spanish Civil War she went out to Bilbao to help evacuate Spanish children from the city when it was under the threat of bombardment and recently a square in the city has been named after her. Finally at the age of 59 she was elected to Parliament for one of the Epping constituencies in 1945 with a 987 majority. Stan recalls this moment when the bells rang out at the church in Epping and workers picking peas in a local field all stopped work and applauded the result.

Hannah died in 1977 and gave her body for medical research. She had numerous issues for which she was a well known campaigner – birth control and the rights of 'oversize women' to be able to buy clothes. Her views on education would have been controversial with many Labour supporters today as she opposed comprehensive education saying that it would lead to a 'levelling down' of educational standards which would deny bright working class children the chance to achieve their full potential.

### **Battersea Socialist Women's Circle**

Finally **Sean Creighton**, secretary of Labour Heritage, who has written and researched on labour in Battersea, spoke on the newly acquired minute book of the Battersea Socialist Women's Circle. This organization was set up to educate women in socialism. It was affiliated to the Battersea Socialist Council. Women from all socialist societies joined. There were 18 names on the book, but others are mentioned in the minutes. It began as a discussion circle – discussing issues such as education, adult suffrage, 'the home work problem', and officialdom in the labour movement. Open public meetings were held in Battersea Park in the summer, attended by Clarion Vans and advertised by chalk on the pavement. Education turned to activity. The women were involved in the Social Democratic Federation and the Battersea Socialist Alliance. They were also involved in reviving Socialist Sunday schools in Battersea – the first one in the country had existed in Battersea in 1892. After 1918 some of the women from this circle became prominent in local labour politics, standing as council candidates and Charlotte Despard stood as a parliamentary candidate.

Barbara Humphries

### **Labour Heritage AGM**

Labour Heritage held a short AGM. Reports were given by all the officers. It was reported that it had been a successful year for Labour Heritage, and day schools/ conferences had been held in London, Plymouth, Essex, West London and Manchester. Some of these had been co-sponsored by local Labour Parties and other organizations. All of



these events have been reported in the bulletin. This had resulted in an increase in membership. Three substantial bulletins had been produced during the year and material had continued to come in. Also a regular newsletter had been produced. Thanks were voted to the secretary, Sean Creighton for his success in reviving Labour Heritage.

Increased activities had led to more expenses and it was proposed and agreed that the subscriptions be raised to - £4 (unwaged), £10 (individual waged) and £25 for organizations. There would also be a joint subscription of £12 for couples who both wanted to be members but requested only one mailing.

The following officers were re-elected – Chair – Stan Newens, Secretary- Sean Creighton, Treasurer- Irene Wagner, Bulletin editor- Barbara Humphries. The following were also elected to serve on the committee – Anne Lubin, Helen McAlpine, Jonathan Wood, Betty Costello, Stephen Bird, Heidi Topman and Bill Bollard.

Members stood in silence to mark the death of a committee member – Ron Burgess in 2002.

Plans for activities during the course of the year included a day in Essex, planned for October 25<sup>th</sup> and in West London, yet to be decided

### **LABOUR'S FIRST WOMAN POPULAR HISTORIAN, NOVELIST, AND MP – MARY AGNES HAMILTON 1884-1966**

Larry Iles gave a talk on Mary Hamilton MP at the Truman State University conference in honour of 'Women's history month' March 2003.

He said that for all the fanfare about a record number of women Labour MPs

after the 1997 general election, this triumph had a historical precedent in the 1929-31 Labour Government when a record 15 women Labour MPs were elected. This included future ministers such as Ellen Wilkinson and Jennie Lee, but also the lesser name Mary Agnes Hamilton. Mary or "Molly" as she preferred to be called was a writer, biographer and civil servant as well as Labour MP.



Studying economics at Cambridge she went into journalism. Her first political allegiances before World War 1 were with the Liberal Party and she was appointed to serve on the Poor Law Reform Commission supporting the Majority report, which in opposition to the Webbs, did not call for the wholesale abolition of the workhouse system, on grounds of cost. Lloyd George also appointed her to serve on his land tax survey, which aimed at taxing all land in a more equitable manner.

During World War 1 Mary joined the Union of Democratic Control and the Independent Labour Party. She had become opposed to the jingoism of Liberal war policy and joined up with anti-war socialists. Her interest in foreign affairs and peace was to earn her a post at the League of Nations in the



1920s, as deputy delegate to Hugh Dalton and Arthur Henderson.

As a Labour candidate for Chatham in 1923 she finished in third place, but went on to become a candidate in Blackburn in 1924. This was then a two seat constituency. She was elected to Parliament in 1929. However her admiration for Ramsay Macdonald ended in the summer of 1931 when he went along with cutting unemployment benefit at a time of world recession and mass unemployment. Like the majority of Labour MPs she knew where her loyalties lay. She was defeated in the 1931 general election and wrote a scathing attack on Macdonald in the 'Clarion' and 'Labour Woman' denouncing his 'vanity', 'his lack of understanding of even Keynesian public works' This was insupportable to her!

Mary was also a novelist and autobiographer. In 1944 she had published an autobiographical work entitled "Remembering my good friends", about Cambridge in the interwar years. In 1931 she was busy promoting the US her latest novel - "Murder in the House of Commons". She was never to gain another parliamentary seat, but became the first Labour woman to serve as a governor for the BBC 1935-1938. In 1940 she became a civil servant but did not surrender to political neutrality. She served on Beveridge's welfare state planning committees. Under the Attlee Government Mary worked for the US section of the government's Information Ministry.

Her legacy is of a feminist and radical. But according to Larry her radicalism started to wear off in her later years. In 1953 she published a second volume of her reminiscences "Uphill all the way".

## 'THE UNION MAKES US STRONG'

This new internet site at <http://www.unionhistory.info> has been launched by the London Metropolitan University and the Trades Union Congress. The web site will present a history of the British trade union movement since the development of organized labour in the early nineteenth century. There will be digitized photographs, posters and documents from the TUC Library collections based at the London Metropolitan University. There is a unique record of the young, mostly female strikers at the Bryant and May factory in Hackney who struck in 1888 for better pay and working conditions. Their struggle represented the birth of a new phase in trades union history - New Unionism- one where largely unskilled workers began to become more effectively organized.

Other packages to be added during the year include - the full original manuscript of the Ragged Trousered Philanthropists by Robert Tressell, a selection of material from the Library's archive of the General Strike of 1926 and every Congress report from 1868-1968.





**REVIEW OF "DAVID JOHN DAVIS" BY MARTIN DAVIES BY STAN NEWENS**

Some three or four years ago, Martin Davies of Swansea became interested in family history and resolved to research his own ancestry. His knowledge at the outset did not go back beyond his own grandparents. He was therefore astonished to discover that this great grandfather, in the direct male line, had been a prominent public figure in West Ham, and was one of the pioneers of the labour movement in the area. Surprised that none of his older relatives had ever mentioned this to him, although many of them were supporters of the Labour cause, he threw himself into the task of uncovering every ascertainable detail of his great grandfather's life. The result is a fascinating story, now available as a desktop publication.

David John Davis (1856-1933), originally David Davies, the son of a miner at Dowlais, Methyr Tydfil, lost his father at the age of ten years and followed him into the pits without learning to read or receiving any education.

Told by a phrenologist, who tested his bumps at fifteen years of age, that he had untapped potential, he was spurred to attend a Baptist Sunday School and learnt to read, at first in Welsh and later in English. Equipped with this new ability, he joined the Salvation Army, as a full time worker, met and married a fellow officer, Elizabeth Wood, the daughter of an east London docker, and worked like a man possessed for the cause he had espoused. He was moved from one place to another, produced at least one addition to his family at every posting, and was highly successful in his work.

However he decided to leave the Salvation Army and became a Baptist minister in Lancashire. Here he met a militant left-wing Irishman, Jack Jones, who was destined to become the first Labour MP for Silvertown, and who influenced him to leave Lancashire and the Baptist Church to join the struggle for socialism in West Ham, where things were happening.

Supporting his wife and eventually eight children by undertaking employment as an insurance agent and later the manager of a workers' lodging house, David John Davis, as he now called himself, became a dedicated campaigner for the Labour cause in his new district. In due course he was elected a councillor, later an alderman, chaired West Ham Education Committee, served as election agent for Will Thorne, and in 1922, was chosen as Mayor. On the way, he was in the thick of many key struggles, though he quarrelled with Jack Jones and Will Thorne. By the late 1920s, he was a father figure for the labour movement in this key Labour area.

David John Davis died in 1933 and his funeral was attended by a considerable body of mourners. By the time that this great grandson, Martin Davies learnt of his existence, however, the grave was sadly neglected and the headstone had disappeared. However, a replacement has now been ordered and Martin Davies hopes that some of those whose positions have been achieved by dint of the work of pioneers plus some of his cousins will attend a rededication ceremony.

David John Davis must have been a remarkable man. To extricate himself from dire poverty and illiteracy and then to dedicate himself to the cause of improving the lot of others must be regarded as a worthwhile and positive



way to live. With his work, he also raised a family of eight and his contribution to establishing West Ham as a Labour stronghold was considerable.

How West Ham was won for the Labour cause must be of great interest to historians of the labour movement and Martin Davies has produced some fascinating material for those interested to study. He is now going to do research on Tom Groves, another Labour pioneer, who became a Member of Parliament in the area. This is greatly to be welcomed. The life of David John Davis is now available as a desktop publication. Those interested in acquiring a copy should contact the author at - 7 Prospect Place, Sketty, Swansea, SA2 9EH, price £4.50, post free.

## LETTERS AND DISCUSSION

### **The Labour Party and the issues posed by the British Empire, immigration and the European Union**

There were three fundamental changes in respect of matters that affected Britain during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These were -

1. The end of Empire
2. Immigration of a large number of people from former colonies in the West Indies, Africa and Asia
3. Britain's entry into what is today known as the European Union

This paper is concerned with the impact that these events had on the labour movement, including Labour Party representatives, Party members and those who would generally expect to vote Labour.

## Empire

During the Victorian period and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Britain had the largest empire that the world had ever known, an Empire on which the sun never set. There were events such as the Great Durbar in Delhi in 1911 and the Wembley Empire Exhibition of 1924 which proclaimed the benefits of Empire and informed the world who was in charge.

For most people in Britain this was an achievement in which they felt a sense of pride. They also knew that the maintenance, and as far as possible, unity of the Empire, required a sense of duty and responsibility.

By 1970, however the Empire had virtually disappeared and terms such as colonialism and imperialism became dirty words. Increasingly the majority of people in Britain questioned whether it was morally right to rule over other people without their consent.

Prior to 1939 it was rare indeed to see a black face on a street in Britain. Today people from the West Indies, Africa and Asia make up perhaps ten per cent of the population. In a large town such as Leicester the majority of the citizens or their forefathers emigrated from those lands. Mass migration beginning the 1950s was a consequence of Britain's labour shortage at the time and the open door policy was a legacy of the Empire. The manifest hostility of the native population, most clearly witnessed in areas of poverty and deprivation, took governments and local authorities by surprise. Those who showed the greatest hostility to the immigrants have been dubbed 'racists'.

Although having a great Empire, Britain was in reality a small island on the edge of Europe. The people, since the 100



Years War (1336-1453) had always felt threatened by the 'Great Powers on the Mainland'. This feeling was reinforced by two world wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to 1945, poor people, if they ever went abroad, did so on the orders of the government, who supplied a gun and told them to kill foreigners.

For a variety of reasons the Empire could not be maintained after 1945, but it must be asked how the labour movement saw the Empire prior to that date. Imperial thoughts and actions were not confined to members of the ruling class such as Lord Curzon.

While it was difficult for British men and women obsessed by the dangers of unemployment and semi-starvation, ill-housed and ill-educated, to think in terms of Britain's imperialist destiny in far-off lands, the better-off members of the working class nevertheless participated in this crusade. Many emigrated to become farmers, engineers, shop-keepers, policemen, soldiers and sailors. They for the most part were pioneers, but they generally lived better than in the home country and much better than the native population. Letters home, perhaps exaggerating the good life, enhanced the lure of the Empire. This was reinforced by events at home such as Empire Day (24<sup>th</sup> May) and the Wembley Empire Exhibition of 1924, which took place during the period of the first Labour Government, and was enthusiastically supported by Jimmy Thomas, the Colonial Secretary. In a sense, all sections of the community except the very poorest benefited both economically and psychologically from the existence of the Empire. During the inter-war years, Fenner Brockway, of the Independent Labour Party was one of the few labour representatives to have voiced any criticism.

## Europe

Dean Aitchison, the former American secretary of state said in 1960 "Britain has lost an Empire but has not gained a role". In that time, Britain did gain a role, that of being a member, albeit a reluctant member, of the European Economic Community. Joining in 1973, Britain has seen the Community become ever wider and deeper. Wider (more countries) generally having British support, but deeper (greater integration) being supported reluctantly, if at all. The directly elected European Assembly, the Single Market, the European Community Court, the Maastricht Treaty (unified currency and change of name to the European Union), the Amsterdam and Nice Treaties, which concerned extended membership and majority voting, being examples.

All sections of the Labour Party have been at loggerheads about the European Union since the party conference of 1960. The Labour Party has both a national and international aspect, being members of the Socialist International and the Socialist Group of the European Assembly. It would be wrong to state that all those hostile to the European Union are so because of international hatred. Tony Benn, being the most obvious example where it is clearly untrue. Nevertheless it is a factor to be considered.

## Racism

Returning to the problem of racism, this was a word unheard of until the 1960s. It is easy to state that imperial values had a racist aspect to them. However there are other factors to be considered and these are mentioned in a study of the Birmingham constituency of Sparkbrook



by John Rex and Robert Moore undertaken during the 1960s.

Sparkbrook is an interesting constituency. Up to 1945 it was held by the Conservative Leo Amery who had been Secretary of State for India. There were virtually no Indians living in the constituency in 1945. The relatively well-off Conservative voters living in the large late Victorian houses were gradually moving out to leafier suburbs. The houses were bought up by landlords who sub-divided them and let them to less well off Brummies and immigrants from Ireland.

Despite this an Indian doctor named Dhanie Prem who lived in the area considered running against Leo Amery, as he considered that he was responsible for the Bengal famine of 1943 and he also wanted independence for India. Eventually this doctor was persuaded to support the Labour candidate who was successful in 1945. The constituency stayed Labour until 1959 and Labour won again in 1964 with Roy Hattersley.

An important institution in the constituency was the Labour Club. It was built by the voluntary labour of its members and was next door to the party headquarters. The members were overwhelmingly Irish, who had emigrated to this area for many years but in ever larger numbers in the 1940s and 1950s. There was no formal colour bar, there

simply were no coloured members. Although mainly a social club, no prospective councillor or MP could ignore it. Many members of the party organization were club members. Of itself, support of the Labour Club was not sufficient to win a ward, but it was necessary.

The other difficulty which confronted the Labour Party's attempts to maximize

its vote was that of the delivery of the "coloured vote". In addition to Dr Dhanie Prem, Sparkbrook had a Mr Dalal, a young businessman, who was also ready to "deliver the coloured vote". The difficulty, as always, was that a Labour candidate who was too supportive of the needs of coloured people, automatically meant the lack of support from the white community who would transfer their support to the Conservative candidate.

Further comments and discussion invited on this article by Michael Leahy

### **Ealing-Southall**

Michael Leahy's remarks about Labour and race relations in the Birmingham Sparkbrook constituency reminded me of the situation in my own constituency. Southall's community of immigrants from the Punjab in the 1950s were recruited to work in the Wolfe Rubber company. This changed the character of the whole area in a very short space of time from being a white working class area to a mainly Asian area. In spite of low unemployment in the 1950s and 1960s in west London this aroused hostility from sections of the white working class and a racist backlash. Some trades union convenors were known to oppose the recruitment of Asian apprentices to become engineers at local factories and wanted council housing restricted to residential qualifications which would have excluded Asians. The National Front campaigned in the area.

However the Labour MP for Southall at that time, Syd Bidwell rejected this – his way was to "offer the hand of friendship to the newcomers". This was not popular with everyone at that time. I interviewed



Syd before he died and he recalled how Welsh immigrants into Southall in the 1930s had been rejected – “Welsh go home “ was painted on the same wall that “blacks go home” was to be painted in the 1960s. Syd had a problem with the Southall Labour Club which “did” operate a colour bar! This club like the one in Birmingham had been built by volunteers including Syd’s father and breaking away was to be a wrench. Nevertheless the local constituency party did have to break links with the Labour Club to retain credibility. Ealing Southall has remained Labour throughout this time, including during the Thatcher years when one seat after another was lost in London. Southall is now comprised of a majority of ethnic minorities – the latest arrivals being from Somalia. Labour remains firmly in control in the constituency – but who controls Labour? The impact of businessmen who can pull out the Labour vote has undermined constituency activism over the years, but this has had its parallels in other parts of the country, it is far from being a problem specific to the Asian community.

Barbara Humphries

*Roy Jenkins – Harold Smith writes as a comment on Stephen Bird’s obituary in the last Labour Heritage bulletin*

*“I have no wish to airbrush Roy Jenkins from Labour Party history “*

*“Just the opposite, Roy Jenkins, like his disciple, Tony Blair, never claimed to be a socialist.”*

*“He, like Blair, was not at home in the Labour Party. His natural home was in the Liberal Party of Gladstone.”*

*“Cultured man he may have been but his greatest contribution – purely negative and destructive – was in the formation of the Social Democratic Party, which nearly destroyed the Labour Party, and certainly helped Thatcher to power.”*

*“So, no tears for Roy Jenkins – we were better off without him.”*

Correction to article in Labour Heritage Bulletin Spring 2003 review of ‘Zilliacus – a life for peace and socialism’/ by A. Potts, reviewed by Stan Newens. The Labour Foreign Secretary in the 1929-1931 Labour Government was Arthur Henderson – not Arthur Greenwood, as printed in the article- apologies from the editor

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